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Economic Criticism

PAUL CROSTHWAITE, PETER KNIGHT AND NICKY MARSH

This chapter covers work in economic criticism published in 2016, and explores how recent contributions to the field draw on existing ways of understanding the relations between culture and the economy, whilst forging new paradigms and syntheses. It is divided into five sections: 1. Introduction; 2. Projections; 3. Reading and Performing the Market; 4. Debt, Derivatives and Growth; 5. Libidinal Economy.

1. Introduction

Critical work at the interface of culture and economics published in 2016 frequently takes its coordinates from earlier historical moments, aesthetic forms and intellectual traditions, yet invariably does so with at least half an eye on the pertinence of the past to the convergence of culture and economy in the present. Meanwhile, important new studies focus their attention on theorizing and contesting cultural and economic formations still emerging into view, and find invaluable resources for doing so in previous generations of economic critique. As in the past two iterations of this chapter of *YWCCT*, we take a broad approach to this work in what follows, aiming to encompass a wide range of significant material, whilst dealing in greater detail with particular titles where they offer especially clear opportunities to take stock of the past, present and future of the field.

2. Projections

In *Daniel Defoe and the Bank of England: The Dark Arts of Projecters* Valerie Hamilton and Martin Parker take a speculative punt that ‘novels and organizations are mechanisms that work in the same ways’ (p. 146), because they ‘share fundamental characteristics of form, function and technique’ (p. 1). This lively and accessible book explores the shared historical moment of origin, around the turn of the eighteenth century, of the modern organization and the novel – ‘two institutions that shaped the modern world’ (p. 2). It teases out the similarities between two prominent examples, the Bank of England and Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722). Hamilton and Parker’s argument is that both the book and the bank are products of the ‘Projecting Age’, in the phrase coined by Defoe in *Essay upon Projects* (1697), his first published work, which tapped into the sudden proliferation of joint-stock companies and enthusiasm for speculative ventures in the 1690s. They suggest that both the Bank of England (founded in 1694) and Defoe’s novel emerge out of the social and intellectual milieu of London’s coffee houses, a world in which tradesmen and religious dissenters were able to overturn conventions and get ahead (Defoe, after all, was the author of *The Complete English Tradesman* [1726], recognised as one of the first business manuals). The suggestion is that the disruptive and ‘unreal’ nature of finance allowed it to undermine traditional aristocratic patterns of wealth and social hierarchy based on real estate. Hamilton and Parker in effect claim that the Financial Revolution, and the speculative projects like the Bank of England it engendered, were as radical as the novel in overturning established ways of being and thinking.

They show how Defoe and William Paterson (the main projector of the Bank) shared similar backgrounds and similar experiences of fortunes won and – more frequently – lost and, moreover, quite probably knew one another (Defoe, indeed, may have written some of the texts attributed to Paterson). Hamilton and Parker find

thematic parallels between *Moll Flanders*, a novel that permitted readers to experience risky, rip-roaring adventures through the controlled confines of a narrative that convention ensured would turn out for the best, and a speculative project like the Bank of England that enabled investors to engage in risky ventures within the comparatively safe confines of a joint-stock company. Both the novelist and the banker are thus ‘managers of uncertainty’ (p. 130). Like its author and the novel itself, Moll is an upstart and an outsider, a creation both in and of the market. The novelist and the Bank’s founder are chancers, storytellers whose fabulations require a credibility-generating suspension of disbelief from their audiences, but which then come to take on a life and a solidity of their own. Hamilton and Parker make the case that corporations are fictions, and, like novels, are speculative proposals that conjure up an imaginary world that can end up becoming reality, a text that breaks free from its original author’s intentions. It is as if the Bank invents itself, Hamilton and Parker argue, just as Moll’s life seems to be guided by an invisible hand. The book makes a convincing case that organizations like the Bank of England are often naturalized, thought of as if they had been a solid and inevitable foundation of the establishment forever, their contingent origins long since forgotten. Realizing that the past was not inevitable can help us imagine a different future that does not merely repeat the present. The authors therefore call for organization theory to develop a demystificatory account of the historical emergence of the corporation as a particular ‘genre of organizing’ (p. 9) with its own conventions and contrivances, in the same way that literary theory has provided rich accounts of the origins of the genre of the novel.

In the conclusion, Hamilton and Parker ask why it matters that ‘a novel is like an organization’ (p. 154). But the question could have been posed the other way

around, and this raises the question of whether literary historians or business historians will be more interested in the parallels the book explores. It provides an insightful account of Defoe as a projector and the novel itself as a speculative project in the broadest sense, a series of observations that will be of interest to literary scholars. Potentially more illuminating, though, is the claim that an organization is like a novel, and this line of thinking promises to open new avenues of inquiry for business studies, following on from previous work examining the role that narrative plays in organizations, e.g. Barbara Czarniawska, *A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies* (Sage [1998]). In effect, the claim is that reading Defoe helps us to see that ‘organizations always have fiction as their foundation’ (p. 157). Literature might therefore be not merely a sideshow, but instead provide a vital insight into the nature of economics and finance.

The echoes, similarities and parallels that Hamilton and Parker find are fascinating, yet at times the connections are over-stretched. Often it seems that the book is not about organizations in general, but the emergence of the joint-stock corporation as a historically specific mode of organization. More generally, what is the precise nature of the similarity between novels and organizations? Is it an analogy? At times, the authors seem to mean it quite literally, referring, for example, to ‘the fictionality of organizations which are shown to be projections *in exactly the same way* that novels are projections’ (p. 155; emphasis added). Are we dealing with a causal relationship between the novel and the corporation, and if so, which way does the causality flow? Is this a homological relationship? Hamilton and Parker suggest other possible homologies that could be explored, such as the coincidence between the emergence of the genre of gothic literature and the ‘genre’ of the industrial factory as a mode of organization. Some of these homologies have indeed

been explored by literary scholars, but the problem with New Economic Criticism has at times been the tendency to make sweeping generalizations about the convergence of literary and economic forms without being clear on the specifics of the causal nexus.

The book is at its strongest when it mines the rich seam of work by scholars such as Sandra Sherman and Catherine Ingrassia that demonstrates in detail how the emergence of the novel was shaped by and in turn helped forge the rise of financial capitalism, because it conditioned readers to take imaginary worlds represented by paper instruments as if they were real. These arguments make most sense when they are embedded in the specific contexts of the Financial Revolution at the turn of the eighteenth century. The homology between *Moll Flanders* and the Bank of England, between the novel and the organisation, might therefore be specific to that historical moment of origin. These reservations aside, it would be unwise to bet against Hamilton and Parker's wager that it is 'well worth crossing the divide between the disciplines of literary theory and management' (p. 164). They recognize, however, that such interdisciplinary work is likely to be 'bad literary theory, bad organization theory and probably bad history too' (p. 164). If from the viewpoint of literary theory some of its conclusions tend to be either familiar or underdeveloped, a reviewer from a business school confessed to being 'underwhelmed by the coverage of organization theory' (Mark Gatenby, *Organization Studies* 37[2016] 1686). It is noticeable that the book is a product of a collaboration between a critical management studies professor and a PhD student who began in a literature department but ended up in a business school, and who now works as an HR consultant in the City. In a similar fashion, for Mary Poovey's forthcoming study of the role of mathematical modelling in finance in the twentieth century she teamed up with Kevin Brine, a former partner at a Wall

Street investment firm. Avoiding homological generalizations might therefore require a more detailed understanding of the specific dynamics of each side of the literature/economics divide than a lone scholar from a single discipline can master.

Written by scholars operating outside a literature department, Hamilton and Parker's study makes the case for the relevance of literature for grasping the nature of finance and corporations. The German sociologist Jens Beckert's *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* likewise develops a compelling argument for the necessity of literary theory for understanding economics. As with Hamilton and Parker, Beckert argues that economic activity proceeds not by calculation but through the realm of the imaginary, the speculative conjuring up of future riches in a world that does not (yet) exist. Literature is therefore best placed to help us make sense of the 'fictional expectations' of future-oriented finance. This is a stirring challenge to mainstream economic theory from the viewpoint of the economic humanities, all the more striking because it does not come from an English department.

Where Hamilton and Parker's speculative conclusions are grounded in a specific historical setting and individual characters, Beckert develops a daring and programmatic reinterpretation of capitalism itself. He argues against mainstream economics and its privileging of rationality, in the form of efficient markets, the presumption of an inevitable return to a state of equilibrium, and, above all, the figure of *Homo economicus* as the embodiment of rational expectations. Instead, Beckert's fundamental insight is that the dynamic of capitalism is not based on economic actors rationally calculating their own best interests, but on individual and institutional flights of imagination – projections, to use Hamilton and Parker's term – that fantasize futures that are far from predictable and that in turn create economic

situations that do not return naturally to a state of equilibrium. The entrepreneur with ‘vision’ might just turn out to be a glorified day-dreamer at best, or a con artist at worst. Of course, although the history of capitalism is littered with episodes in which all that is solid melts into air, conversely some castles in the air do materialize into transcontinental railroads and bustling cities. Yet, as Beckert shows, economic choices can seem less than strictly rational if they frequently have to be made under conditions of imperfect knowledge, despite their coming to seem inevitable *post facto*.

The first section of the book lays out the theoretical argument about the temporality of capitalism, suggesting that imagined outcomes of economic endeavour are sustained by persuasive narratives that try to legitimate and make imaginatively and immersively real an uncertain future. It is in this section that Beckert turns to philosophers and theorists of literature, language and aesthetics such as John Searle for an account of how fiction manages to create unreal worlds that nevertheless can become self-fulfilling prophecies, helping to forge the worlds they imagine. The second section deals with what Beckert terms the four ‘building blocks of capitalism’, which all rely on creating fantasy futures in conditions of uncertainty: namely, credit and money; investment; innovation; and consumption. What they have in common is the need for narratives of persuasion that conjure up desirable and plausible future states. The final section considers the role of forecasting and economic theory in shaping collective fictional expectations: how particular economic structures and practices make some visions of the future more imaginable than others.

Although drawing on recent works in economic sociology, Beckert is challenging the tendency to see economic decisions as purely constrained by the weight of the past, while at the same time also challenging purely economic accounts that ignore the social embeddedness of *Homo economicus*. Instead, like Hamilton and

Parker, he finds an optimistic potential in the power of fictional expectations to create alternative – perhaps even better – futures. Here we might wonder if the imagination of particular futures is more politically constructed and constricted than Beckert allows. We might also consider, as revisionist economic historians such as Stephen Mihm, James Taylor, Ian Klaus and Edward Balleisen have recently begun to explore, whether the history of capitalism is ultimately the story of credibility and the confidence trick. Also like Hamilton and Parker, Beckert's argument is driven by a historical claim, that modern capitalism changed how people thought about the future. In this sense the book is in constant dialogue with Max Weber, in trying to find in broad cultural patterns the seeds of the emergence of capitalism. Where Weber identified the protestant ethic of delayed gratification, plodding accumulation and worldly success confirming salvation as the engine transforming traditional societies, Beckert identifies a shift from a pre-modern circular view of time to a more linear and future-oriented one. However, the problem with both Weber and Beckert (and, indeed, with the Hamilton and Parker book) is the familiar chicken-and-egg question of whether the material and institutional reconfigurations brought about by the emergence of capitalist business organisation led to new ways of thinking about and representing the world, or vice versa. It is also far from clear whether the imagination of future returns has always played the same role, and indeed whether it is unique to capitalism. Likewise, although Beckert patiently and systematically explicates literary theories of fictionality, this section of the book feels quite thin on detail, leaving the suspicion that a more historicized account of the varying modalities of fiction in different periods and cultures would produce a more complicated picture of the nature of fictional expectations. The imagination of the future has a long and varied past.

3. Reading and Performing the Market

In *The Market as God* the theologian Harvey Cox shows how ‘the market’ has become a substitute divinity for a secular age. Cox’s starting point came when a friend encouraged him to read the business page of the newspaper to learn more about the real world, only to find that it ‘turned out to bear a striking resemblance to Genesis, the Epistle to the Romans and Saint Augustine’s *City of God*’ (p. 5). The book deftly draws out the parallels between economic and religious ideas, showing how contemporary capitalism has its own ‘myths of origins, legends of the fall, and doctrines of sin and redemption’ (p. 5) that are but pale shadows of true religious mystery. Cox shows how the current market god is imagined to be omnipotent and omniscient, a deity with a life and a mind of its own that is appealed to as ultimate arbiter and oracle, that needs its seers and mystics, as if the market were not under the control of mere mortals. The idea that the market has become god is a simple one (first outlined in an article in the *Atlantic* magazine in 1999), but Cox explores the twists and turns of the analogy in persuasive detail across a range of discursive fields. Cox does not merely point out the curious symmetries between religion and capitalism, but makes an impassioned case that neoliberalism has economically and spiritually impoverished many people around the world, not least because religion itself has become increasingly commercialized.

The book traces the historical development of the idea of the market as god, complementing other recent forays into this territory such as Campbell Jones’s *Can the Market Speak?* (Zero Books [2013]), and Cox’s reassessment of the secularized fantasy of the ‘invisible hand’ also sits alongside other efforts to sketch out our current economic theodicy such as Joseph Vogl’s *The Specter of Capitalism* (see *YWCCT* 24 [2016] 160-61) and *Reading the Market: The Genres of Financial*

Capitalism in Gilded Age America (Johns HopkinsUP [2016]), by Peter Knight (one of the authors of the present chapter). The story, elegantly told, follows Karl Polanyi in describing the transformation of the economy of traditional societies, constrained by religious and moral precepts, into one in which the bottom line is all that counts. Cox focuses on the fiction of corporate personality and its resonance with theologies of divine embodiment and immortality; the financialization of increasing swathes of everyday life, as if market capitalism were a missionary force that must spread its message across the globe; and the development of advertising that conjures up insatiable desire and the promise of a better future that is always just out of reach. The rhetorical linkages that Cox teases out are striking – unnerving, even – but at times the significance of the parallels are not fully worked through: how does understanding the theological underpinnings of the fiction of corporate personality help us more effectively challenge the increasing legal immunity of corporations, or rein in the unregulated power of the realm of shadow banking? And is the god that the market has become more properly thought of as the god of the New Testament, the Old Testament, or even the gods of ancient Greece and Rome? Cox dedicates the book to Pope Francis who has challenged what he has called the ‘deified market’, and throughout *The Market as God* there is a plea for a return to a more local and humane form of economic activity, which might look, for example, to older religious ideas such as a debt jubilee. Yet if Cox is right that the market has now become god in a secular age (and if Weber is right that protestant religion led to market society in the first place), then a return to particular forms of religious belief might not provide the most effective way to challenge the status quo.

John O’Brien’s *Literature Incorporated: The Cultural Unconscious of the Business Corporation, 1650-1850* traces the trope of incorporation in a wide range of

writing from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, including economic tracts, legal cases, poems, plays, essays, novels and short stories. In doing so the book forms a useful companion piece to Ralph Clare's *Fictions Inc.: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film and Popular Culture* (see *YWCCT* 24[2016] 167–68). As with Hamilton and Parker, his aim is not to provide a Whiggish account of the inevitable, triumphant emergence of the modern business corporation, but to historicize and denaturalize it, revealing in the process how the idea of incorporation shaped wider cultural understandings of personhood and agency. O'Brien considers the engagement in economic and imaginative writing with the concept of incorporation in a range of its historical forms, including 'city governance, guild organization, state-sponsored colonial exploration, money lending, insurance, slave trading, and university funding' (p. 6). In detailed readings of authors such as John Locke, Eliza Haywood, Harriet Martineau and Edgar Allen Poe, *Literature Incorporated* provides a richly detailed account of how key economic metaphors emerged, and were contested and reconfigured. In the introduction he makes the case powerfully that economics is 'a way of modeling the world that is more like literature than it is willing to let on' (p. 8). Far from being a poor cousin to economics, the 'comparative advantage' of literary analysis is that is attuned to the hidden assumptions contained in figural speech, and thus can provide a privileged historical analysis of the concepts, metaphors and imaginative constructs of the market, given that economics itself is often insistently presentist, and resistant to the suggestion that its scientific abstractions mask its reliance on 'metaphor, argument and storytelling' (p. 9). As O'Brien notes and Mary Poovey has argued in detail, the potential for literary analysis of economic ideas is particularly strong in eighteenth-century studies, before economics had become a discrete mode of seemingly scientific knowledge,

separated from the broader sweep of political and imaginative writing. Even though few literary works in the period directly represent the corporation (in contrast to the period Clare examines), O'Brien shows how key texts grapple with the central questions of the age, which the emergence of corporations provokes, namely 'the relationship between the state and commerce, about cause and effect, about the individual and the collective' (p. 11). Like the advert from the 1970s for Heineken promoting it as the 'beer that refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach', O'Brien makes the claim that literature articulates the 'cultural unconscious' in ways that more workaday writing cannot: '*The School for Scandal* functions as a wonderfully entertaining and revealing play in which central questions of agency, affect, language, historicity and the place of the business corporation in contemporary British life become intelligible in a way that never reaches articulation in legal decisions or economic tracts' (p. 22). *Literature Incorporated* thus provides a rich example of what comes after the New Economic Criticism, or rather, what happens when the parallels and homologues between literary and economic categories are fleshed out in historically nuanced detail. The price that is paid for doing the analysis properly, of following the logic of Beckert's call for more literary theory in the study of capitalism, is that it is unlikely to garner many readers within the economics department or the business school.

David Hawkes's *Shakespeare and Economic Theory* attributes Shakespeare's foundational importance in our critical and metaphorical vocabulary for economics to the fact that the playwright was witness to the birth of the modern economy, uniquely able to perceive – indeed, sometimes personally to seize – its implications whilst also remaining at a critical distance from them. This tension is at the 'source of Shakespeare's fascination' with the economy, Hawkes suggests, as he is able to

portray the desires and demands of an emerging *Homo economicus* with ‘enough sympathy that we are forced to take their complaints and aspirations seriously’ whilst simultaneously regarding the energies of the new market economy, its commodification of land, labour and money, as ‘threatening and destructive’ to the social order (p. 10).

The opening of the book remains faithful to this structure. It starts with an economic definition from the classics that places the general economy of the domestic *oikos*, which is identified with use value and the good life (and, of course, with wives and slaves), against the restricted economy of *chrematistics*, which is identified with exchange value (and the ‘servile mentality’ of those who are ‘Aristotle’s natural slaves’) (pp. 8, 10). The second chapter narrates the distinction by tracing a historiography for the development of the modern economy. It draws on the historical frameworks of thinkers such as Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein and Karl Polanyi to describe the effects of capitalism’s enclosures of land and labour before turning to the critical framework of figures such as Jacques Derrida and Georges Bataille. Here Hawkes’s own argument becomes more original and incisive as he elucidates the destructively ironical return of the idea of the ‘general economy’ in the contemporary moment, as the home and the everyday have become subject to the destructive values of *chrematistic* exchange and the *oikos* impossible to imagine. The remaining three chapters in this first section of the book make explicit the close relationship not only between Shakespeare and Marx but between the evolution of both in intellectual and political history, and, in spanning a field that moves from the economic determinism of a Soviet readership to the more ludic attentions of the New Economic Criticism, Hawkes renders the complexity of this relationship with admirable and convincing depth.

The second half of the book provides a series of close readings of the plays themselves, focusing not on specific plays or on Shakespeare's own developing chronology but on a series of specific economic concepts: the commons and the commodity; worth and value; wage labour; slavery and reification; usury; and, finally, identity and property. Each of these concepts is clearly rooted in the same Marxist methodology that marks the first, historical and theoretical, section of the book and this approach provides an immensely fruitful strategy for organising the reading of the plays, as it both historically introduces the development of these concepts in Shakespeare's moment of historical transition and fully elucidates his ambivalent relationship to each of them.

4. Debt, Derivatives and Growth

Annie McClanahan's *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis and Twenty-First-Century Culture* explores the relationship between a contemporary culture of unsustainable debt and contemporary aesthetic form. Located between an emerging theoretical vocabulary for debt and a more established literary reading of credit and character, the study explores how a wide range of American cultural texts have represented the appearance of the indebted 'crisis subject' of the contemporary. Although the introduction is perhaps a little diffident at first, elaborating evidence of this impossible indebtedness rather than the nuanced radicality of its own contribution to our understanding of it, it concludes by staking out an apocalyptic register as it argues that debt, 'credit that is unpaid, defaulted, foreclosed, bankrupted, written-off, unredeemed, is the economic form' of a "'terminal crisis" in which no renewal of capital profitability is possible' (p. 15).

The two chapters in the first part of the book deal with the ‘Social Persons’ that debt creates, offering detailed readings of how subjectivity is constituted by these radically indebted conditions. The first traces the connections between behavioural economics and the credit crisis realist novel in order to demonstrate their complementary shortcomings, the ways in which both suggested that the crisis was the consequence of individual rather than structural, political or institutional shortcomings. It reads a range of post-crisis realist novels, including Jess Walters’ *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009), Sam Lypsyte’s *The Ask* (2010), Eric Puchner’s *Model Home* (2010), Adam Haslett’s *Union Atlantic* (2010), Martha McPhee’s *Dear Money* (2010) and Jonathan Dee’s *The Privileges* (2010), through behavioural economics and delivers both a damning critique of that field’s insistence on the individual’s affective desires – suggesting that it offers little more than ‘*homo economicus* deprived of whatever depth and power he once possessed’ – and a nuanced reading of the literary’s response to this problematic (p. 27). The body of the chapter contrasts the novels of Walter, Lypsyte and Puchner against those of Haslett, McPhee and Dee and suggests that whilst the first trio places responsibility for the crisis, predictably, with the analogously presented moral and marital failures of middle-class American consumers, the latter offers a more radical, if implicit, critique of behavioural economics’ ‘tendency to reduce, flatten and generalize individual psychology’ (p. 33). What Dee’s novel, in particular, shows, McClanahan suggests, in a phrase that echoes Ole Bjerg’s claim that it is not the individual’s but rather money’s own desires that now propel us, is that narrative is best read ‘as narrated not by a man or a woman but by money itself’ and that it ‘registers not simply the foreclosure of “society” but the liquidation of “individual men and women” themselves’ (p. 53).

The following chapter, on ‘Credit, Character and Personification’, perhaps the strongest of the book, places the relatively familiar history of character and credit – in which the realist novel is assumed to train the reader to understand a typified notion of character in ways which ‘made it possible for economic creditworthiness to appear as a matter of both moral character and social context’ (p. 59) – against a series of experimental texts that articulate the usurpation of these practices by the quantifications of contemporary credit rating technologies. Yet, as McClanahan makes clear, these credit scores are more complex than the language of objective quantification suggests, and ‘both the persona and the personal continues to haunt both the practice and discourse of credit evaluation’ because credit scores make ‘the detail of our personal history and individual behaviour legible and functional: the credit score thus performs the work of mediation once accomplished by the narrative report’ (p. 63). The chapter then examines the ways in which a range of cultural texts have responded to the emergence of what she calls, following Gilles Deleuze, “‘dividuals’”, the divided data bodies of late capitalism’ whose ‘lack of coherence or consistency can be registered only by caricature’s excess of detail and data’ (p. 71). Particularly powerful in the readings that follow is McClanahan’s unsettling of one of the accepted orthodoxies of the moment, Maurizio Lazzarato’s claim that debt functions through a Foucauldian internalization of power, by demonstrating that the ‘trust on which credit claims to depend is secured not through the alienation of the debtor’s morality but by the power of the state to act on her body [...] to remove the debtor’s capacity to feed and educate and house herself’ (p. 95).

This violent complicity of the state with the cultures of debt frames the second section of the book, ‘Home Economics’. Chapter 3 produces a nuanced reading of the variety of mimetic modes deployed in the emergence of the dystopian genre of

‘Photography and Foreclosure’, suggesting that ‘even as they try to represent the feral houses of the crisis as the signs of racial or economic Otherness, these photographs ultimately reveal that indebtedness is a condition more widely shared than ever before, a condition that can no longer be banished in the margins of either national space or collective consciousness’ (p. 113). The question of how art has responded to the explicit presence of a corrosive debt culture, and how it might offer a collective critique that can re-articulate its destruction of the self, are central to both the book’s final chapter and coda. Chapter Four brings together a series of horror movies that have made the indebted and speculatively sold mortgage a site of uncanny terror and argues that these films unsettle the long generic tradition of home and horror, in which economic anxiety is latent and the tendency is to ‘imagine a restored calculus for accountability’ (p. 151), by making the violence of finance’s models of retribution excessively literal. McClanahan argues that these films ‘suggest that it is now less and less possible to see debt as anything other than a socially destructive force’ (p. 182). The book’s concluding coda returns to the reality of McClanahan’s context as she attempts to encompass what living with the existence of this violence now means. Here, too, she overturns a recent theoretical commonplace, Laurent Berlant’s identification of the ‘cruel optimism’ through which a generation attaches itself to a promise of social progression that will never be fulfilled, in favour of a ‘demystified, canny and more radical kind of knowledge’, a ‘crisis subjectivity’ that offers new possibilities for collective action (p. 195).

How to engage politically with the forms of contemporary ‘financial engineering’ premised on ever-escalating debt is also the central question of *Derivatives and the Wealth of Societies*. This set of essays is edited by Benjamin Lee and the late Randy Martin (also the book’s dedicatee), whose death in 2015 was a

major loss for the fields of cultural studies and Marxist theory, to which he made numerous important contributions. The book is the work of scholars associated with two significant interdisciplinary hubs: the Cultures of Finance Working Group at NYU and the Bruce Initiative on the Future of Capitalism at the University of California at Santa Cruz. While it consists of eight single-authored essays, the volume is envisaged, as the preface explains, not simply as a standard edited collection, but as offering, ‘in as coherent and unified a voice as possible, a general proposal for a new way to understand the social dimensions of derivative finance’ (p. xiii). The reference to ‘social dimensions’ is crucial as the volume’s prevailing approach is consistent with other work in economic sociology and anthropology, social studies of finance and literary economic criticism in stressing the entanglement of financial and economic exchange in socio-cultural webs of meaning-making, ritual, imagination, belief and game-playing that performatively constitute markets for instruments like derivatives as ‘*ontologically real social fictions*’, in Edward LiPuma’s phrase (pp. 50, 62; italics in original).

The book’s ‘fundamental insight’, the preface tells us, is that this recognition of how derivative instruments like futures, swaps and options are woven into a latticework of social bonds and obligations makes it possible to see how such instruments ‘already attest to an abundance of social wealth’ with ‘real potential’ to be used ‘for general well-being’ (p. xiii). Arjun Appadurai develops this point when, in his chapter, he asks, ‘Is there a way to transform the derivatives markets (and by extension the contemporary financial markets) into [...] progressive or democratic’ sites rather than ‘sites of the current exploitative, asymmetric and antidemocratic financial order?’ Can there, in other words, be ‘a democratic politics of finance?’ (p. 31). Here and elsewhere, however, the question of how such a progressive

détournement of finance might be achieved is rather left hanging. Robert Wosnitzer's closing chapter – a detailed and informative study of the everyday practice of bond trading – ends with the observation that 'by asserting that bond traders have figured out a way to risk together in order to create wealth, albeit for themselves, the political question of how we might open up these wealth-generating capacities is placed on the table' (p. 273). But that, somewhat disappointingly, is where it remains.

A clearer understanding of what it might mean for financial capitalism to be rerouted along democratic and redistributionist lines comes from Randy Martin's characteristically probing and thoughtful chapter. Martin argues that a potential for new forms of 'gathering, assembly and active association' lies in a condition of 'mutual indebtedness', which is designed to make us feel shamed and alone, but might make us recognize 'the ways that we are social together, even if we never fuse as one' (p. 190). One practical outcome of such a 'politics for derivatives', Martin suggests, might be to campaign for members of the 'creative class', who 'congregate in a neglected area, render that place more desirable, make rents go up, and then are pushed out,' to be entitled to bonds that return some of that appreciation in real estate value 'to the very creative endeavors that made [it] possible' (p. 194).

Taking a more militant approach, Robert Meister asks whether today's citizens might take advantage of 'chokepoints' in financial networks in order to leverage gains in the way that nineteenth-century coal workers did by disrupting their industry's supply chains. Posing the threat of, for example, 'crash[ing] [...] a payments system or database', Meister suggests, might make it possible to extract 'a higher wage, more progressive income taxes and some redistributive social programs' (pp. 171, 168). But, he argues, 'the ultimate subversion of these technologies would be to use them against themselves to appropriate and redistribute the accumulated social wealth that has been

collectively produced' (p. 168). The key challenge, as Meister sees it, is to imagine 'a popular movement' that would 'legitimate' such 'hacktivist' 'acts of sabotage' – so easily cast as fringe, sinister and destructive – as democratic interventions performed 'in "our" name' (p. 172). Whatever the prospects of such a programme, *Derivatives and the Wealth of Societies* offers suggestive and provocative indications of what a politics that, as Appadurai puts it, rejected 'any form of return to a nonmonetized, nonfinancialized order' (p. 31) would look like.

Ole Bjerg's *The Parallax of Growth: The Philosophy of Ecology and Economy* critiques the ways in which the framing of the modern economy has been allowed to construct, and radically delimit, the very idea of ecology. The 'parallax' of the title is Bjerg's attempt to place the two disciplines in a new critical relationship in order to unravel the philosophical manoeuvres that sustain the 'greenwash', the flawed consumerist model of environmentalism. Bjerg names this methodology 'eco-analysis', in a nod to his indebtedness to Slavoj Žižek's model of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and he aims to produce a critique that 'targets' the 'premises' by which economics has been able to ensure its dominance over ecology (p. 231).

The first section of the book examines how the divergence of ecology and economy created an account of the former as a 'world without human subjects' (in which humans are positioned as guilty of disrupting nature's balance) and the latter as a 'world where the human subject is reduced to an individual consumer that is then posed as the measure of every object in the world' and he suggests that 'in the shift between these two perspectives the parallax real of the eco emerges as something that it simultaneously too objective and too subjective' (p. 9). The contrast has a lapsarian frame as the destruction wrought by the human subject is read as a version of Adam's catastrophic entry into the 'otherwise balanced order of paradise' where he becomes,

Bjerg suggests, ‘Economic Man, the subject that turns the eco into a place of human production and consumption, even when it means the extinction of dodos and bisons [*sic*]. [...] [M]an is included as the very point at which the ecological account of nature breaks down’ (p. 24). The result is that ecology emerges as a passive and unknown form; it is a ‘way of speaking about something else, whereas the economy has the capacity for speaking for itself. Ecology does not have its own language, whereas the economy is able to express itself through the language of money’ (p. 25).

In the second section, Bjerg’s final argument emerges more clearly as he is concerned with the question of what an abstract money form does to material social relations. He identifies the move from the eighteenth-century economics of the Physiocrats, in which land is seen as the originator of wealth and nature as the ‘kick-starter of the economy providing an initial gift of the real’, to a classical and latterly neoclassical political economy that used money to substitute the ‘domain of the real’ with ‘the domain of the symbolic’: he moves from Francois Quesnay to Adam Smith to suggest that ‘the invisible hand’ comes to usurp ‘mother nature’ as a source of earthly divinity (pp. 79, 72-73).

The book proposes two kinds of solution to money’s refusal to contemplate that which is ‘priceless’, which exists in the *oikos* rather than in *chrematistics*, to use David Hawkes’s vocabulary. The central critique, which appears most fully in the book’s concluding chapters, reprises some of the territory familiar from Bjerg’s earlier work, *Making Money: The Philosophy of Crisis Capitalism* (see YWCCT 23[2015] 119-21), as he makes it clear that the production of money through debt (what he calls post-credit money) is deeply contradictory as it simultaneously both requires, and makes impossible, the fantasy of endless financial growth that economics is predicated upon. It makes growth impossible, Bjerg elaborates, because

the ‘money supply necessarily increases the amount of debt at a faster rate than the supply of money available to repay the debt’ and it gives rise instead to an economic model that generates only increasing inequality between the debtor and the creditor. Bjerg shares Annie McClanahan’s sense here that the dyad of credit and debt is better represented as a deepening chasm between classes than a moving pendulum and he similarly coincides with her observations about the consequences of this situation, as he urges us to replace the economic assumption that the ‘human subject always wants more’ with the realization that it is rather ‘money itself that always wants growth’ and provides the economy’s destructive dynamism (pp. 220, 232).

The second solution to the problem of money that the book proposes focuses on the meanings that can be given to those ‘priceless’ goods and services that are created and consumed outside of monetary economy, the *oikos* of the domestic that Hawkes is similarly tempted to suggest that Shakespeare laments. For Bjerg this autarky suggests a model of self-sufficiency, which he quickly codes through a gift economy that belongs ‘in the order of the real’ and produces a ‘real labour’. This ‘real’ – being used, we have to assume, in the everyday rather than the Lacanian sense that Bjerg elsewhere deploys – is explicitly and literally feminised, as ‘maternal labour and the resulting birth of a child mark the point where productive labour comes up against the law of impossible exchange.’ (p. 177) This is a line (which is hard not to read through Hawkes’s passing reference to the necessity of wives and slaves) that was being prepared for in Bjerg’s history of eighteenth-century political economy in which power was transferred from ‘Mother nature’ to theories of labour that displaced the capacity ‘to give birth’ to economic man (p. 76).

It is when Bjerg attempts to move this metaphorical language of natural production onto the social politics of the contemporary in the middle chapters of the

book that he starts to produce more questions than he answers. In Chapter Seven, for example, he re-writes the scenario of ‘Ellen the Economics Professor’ (taken from a standard economics textbook) in which money is defended because it frees Ellen from the inefficiently implausible double-coincidence of wants, in which she has to wait for a Farmer who wants to learn economics in order to obtain food, by suggesting that ‘there are plenty of farmers who like women and sex’ and proposing a scenario in which Ellen, instead, enters ‘into a relation’ with one of them in which ‘they make love, she would give birth to his children and he would of course share with her the fruits of his labour’ (p. 181). Although the simplicity of the model renders it apparently ironic (what if Ellen likes cities best? Or, indeed, women?) Bjerg pursues it through a schematic and partial account of second wave feminism’s complicity with the ‘capitalist criteria of the market’, using the words of Nancy Fraser to suggest that women’s emancipation has been ‘harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation’ (p. 186). Yet Bjerg substitutes Fraser’s attention to feminism’s profound ambivalence—her awareness of the necessity of its critiques as well as the co-option of some of its outcomes – with what he calls a more ‘truly subversive feminism’ that would ‘call for the preservation and regeneration of the productive and reproductive capacities of the “household” economy’ (p. 187). Bjerg defends what appears to be a conservatively heteronormative social model (both Ellen’s children and the sexual desire that she responds to are clearly owned by the man in Bjerg’s framing of them) by evoking the ‘power and violence that may be exercised through a privileged position in the gift economy of the household’ (p. 188). This reference to violence seems, at best, perplexing. It evokes the powerful threat that reproductive female sexuality is assumed to pose in ways that ignore not only the work of feminists such as Gayle Rubin (whose foundational reading of the gift in Marcel Mauss and Lévi-

Strauss made clear that it was women's role in a reproductive gift – rather than monetary – economy that was foundational to the sex-gender system and was one in which women were 'in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation') (Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter [Monthly Review Press, 1978], p. 174) and the historical reality of how and where violence does occur within the domestic household.¹

5. Libidinal Economy

2016 saw the publication of three significant books in, or addressing, the intellectual tradition known as libidinal economy: the attempt, that is, to theorize the conjunction of economic relations and the subject's biological and psychic drives. David Bennett's *The Currency of Desire: Libidinal Economy, Psychoanalysis and Sexual Revolution* is the first full-scale study of this tradition. Far from having its origins in the work of renegade psychoanalysts, the clandestine gatherings of Georges Bataille's *Acéphale* society or the *soixante-huitard* poststructuralists, libidinal economy, Bennett argues, has a lineage that stretches back to early eighteenth-century medical tracts, and runs through the philosophy and pornography of the Marquis de Sade, Victorian studies of prostitution, Marx's critique of political economy, nineteenth-century utopian sects and fin-de-siècle sexology, among various other sites.

Naturally, though, the figure of Sigmund Freud looms large. In 1913, Freud famously exhorted his fellow analysts to treat 'money matters' with the same 'matter-of-fact frankness' as 'sexual matters' (p. 45). But, as Bennett shows, Freud's own pecuniary obsessions ('money is laughing gas to me,' he confided to Wilhelm Fliess)

¹ Globally, one in three women will experience violence at the hands of a male partner (State of the World's Fathers Report, MenCare, 2015) <http://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-is-domestic-violence/domestic-violence-the-facts/>.

are at once omnipresent and veiled factors in his work, fleetingly visible in case studies that seem to turn on his own ‘poor house’ neurosis (the bane of the Viennese bourgeoisie) as much as on his patients’ psychosexual difficulties, or in accounts of the libido as ‘exhibit[ing] the properties of money, being capable of investment, expenditure, profit-making or loss, saving or squandering’ (pp. 29, 23).

Bennett’s goal – eminently well-achieved in this learned and skilfully organized book – is to historicize, and thereby ‘denaturalize’ and ‘reopen to critique’, such ostensibly ‘firm, canonical and obligatory’ metaphors (Nietzsche’s words), as well as to show how metaphoricity itself – as a system of equivalences, transfers and exchanges – answers to the very logics that, in the discourse of libidinal economy, it is called upon to describe (pp. 38, 35). Especially compelling are Bennett’s shrewd and sharp-eyed accounts of the inadvertent complicities with capital evident in the revolutionary philosophies and movements that have tried most ardently to literalize the metaphorical relationships between economic dynamism and libidinal exuberance. Thus the Dionysian celebrations of waste, prodigality and sumptuary excess in Reich, Bataille, Baudrillard, Lyotard or Deleuze and Guattari – while countering a Protestant ethic of work and thrift – can read like virtual advertising copy, Bennett suggests, for the carnivalesque worlds of twentieth- and twenty-first-century consumer capitalism.

A similar scepticism about the revolutionary potential of a fully deregulated, laissez-faire libidinal economy is central to Todd McGowan’s *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*. McGowan’s book is a contribution to the Lacano-Marxist wing of psychoanalytically-inflected economic critique popularized by Slavoj Žižek. Like much of Žižek’s work, *Capitalism and Desire* attempts to anatomize not so much the exploitative, unequal and repressive social relations that structure capitalism, but rather the ‘psychic appeal’ that continues to hold people in thrall to the

system despite these relations, and accounts for capitalism's remarkable 'resilience' (pp. 2-3). The origins of this appeal, McGowan argues, lie in the originary moment of subjectivity as such: the entry into language or the symbolic. In McGowan's Lacanian model, the 'break from nature' that occurs with our emergence as 'speaking beings' installs a constitutive absence or lack at the core of the subject – an indelible scar that forever recalls our lost unity with the object-world (p. 23). Capitalism – more specifically the capitalist commodity – promises restitution for this loss by dangling the hope of finding *the* – perfect, transcendent – object that will finally bring total fulfilment. But of course even the most desirable commodity ultimately disappoints, prompting us to cast it aside in search of the one that will truly deliver the goods.

In his key inversion of what is a familiar account of the logic of consumerism, McGowan makes the case that it is precisely this failure to satisfy that is the source of the peculiar gratification that capitalism provides: a means of repetitively playing out the traumatic loss of plenitude that came with the fall into language. As McGowan puts it: 'What appears as a dissatisfying movement forward from commodity to commodity is actually a satisfying repetition of the loss of the object' (p. 39). The 'genius of the system', then, lies in its 'double deception': it continually tantalizes us with the false promise of giving us what we think we want (satisfaction), while secretly rewarding us with what we *really* want (dissatisfaction, which paradoxically thus becomes a kind of masochistic satisfaction) (pp. 39, 22).

A startling consequence of this account of capitalism, for McGowan, is that it neutralizes most forms of radical politics: insofar as revolutionary movements invest in the promise of a future that will overcome present discontent, they accept 'the ruling idea of capitalism and [buy] into the fundamental capitalist fantasy' (p. 13). The true 'revolutionary act' (p. 13), in contrast, lies in recognizing that capitalism

already provides the only kind of satisfaction that we – as speaking beings, wrenched from a primordial union with our objects of desire – can ever hope to access: the satisfaction, that is, of dissatisfaction. The individuals who genuinely ‘put a wrench in the functioning of the capitalist system’ – and ‘portend’ its ‘abolition’ – are thus those ‘bad’ consumers and producers who ‘content themselves with outmoded objects and recognize the satisfaction embodied in the object’s failure to realize their desire’, its very ‘inadequacy’ (pp. 40, 242). In arguing for an affirmation of lack and a negation of desire, then, McGowan’s book is, as he puts it, the ‘anti-*Anti-Oedipus*’ (p. 49).

Capitalism and Desire offers an intriguing and frequently compelling variant on existing models of ideology critique, but its emphasis on capitalism’s reliance on our psychic investment perhaps inevitably downplays the more workaday pressures that keep people locked into the system, and mean that even those who are ‘divest[ed] psychically’ (p. 40) may still find themselves obliged to go through the motions of capitalist life in order simply to eke out a viable existence. Yet as McGowan himself acknowledges, the rejection of the search for the perfectly satisfying commodity ‘does not topple capitalism’ alone (p. 40). His claim that this rejection is nonetheless ‘the necessary condition for revolutionary politics’ (p. 40) makes a significant and provocative intervention in contemporary left thought.

The capacity of psychoanalysis to illuminate the complex attachments forged under capitalism is also central to Benjamin Y. Fong’s *Death and Mastery: Psychoanalytic Drive Theory and the Subject of Late Capitalism*. Much like McGowan, Fong is concerned with how individuals may actively, if unconsciously, embrace the ‘destabilization wrought by capitalism’, which, he suggests, provides ‘a form of perverse psychic gratification in undermining the individual’s mastery’ (his or her sense of control, capability, assurance, etc.) (pp. 2, 3). Fong argues that it is Freud,

in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, who offers the first systematic attempt to reckon with this ‘psychic force that works against our own mastery’ – a force Freud names the death drive (p. 3). Fong’s first three chapters work through the different permutations on this basic dynamic found in Freud’s own work and in that of two of his followers: Hans Loewald (a relatively little-known figure outside American psychoanalytic circles) and that pre-eminent interpreter of the Freudian legacy, Jacques Lacan. The death drive, as Fong theorizes it, drawing on these sources, is in effect the urge to reverse the processes of subjectification and individuation that McGowan describes in *Capitalism and Desire*: the urge, that is, to be re-absorbed into a state of undifferentiated co-existence with other bodies (most obviously, the maternal body) and the world at large.

While scholarly, meticulous and conveyed with real finesse, these chapters, with their intent focus on the minutiae of particular strands of these thinkers’ ideas, sometimes leave the bigger picture slightly obscure, especially as regards the relation of these theories of the psyche to theories of capitalism. The book makes good on its subtitle, and demonstrates those earlier parts to have been doing essential foundational work, though, in its final two chapters, which consider the ways in which concepts of the death drive filter into the accounts of late capitalism offered by the Frankfurt School. This is Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse’s ‘late capitalism’ – not Fredric Jameson’s or Ernest Mandel’s, let alone our own, but Fong convincingly argues that his ‘reconstruction’ (p. 83) of their thought has much to tell us about the media of today’s ‘culture industry’, especially the ubiquitous smart phone (p. 124). Fong’s deft reading of the first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers aims to make explicit an idea that he takes to be implicit in their work: namely, that a desire to ‘lose oneself’ by surrendering to the flow of ‘the

moving sound image' typical of the culture industry arises from an imperative to escape both alienated mechanical labour and the 'the stifling rigidity' of one's own ego in a moment of '*direct death drive gratification*' (pp. 95, 97, 100; italics in original). In comments that speak constructively to recent proclamations of a 'post-critical' turn in the humanities, Fong argues that for Adorno, in particular, the capacity of critical thought to expose the drive towards 'self-forgetting' elicited by the culture industry answers to a different species of 'drive gratification', which finds realization in a 'knowledge of the world' that in turn 'make[s] politics possible' (p. 107). The Adornian credo – 'thought is happiness, even where unhappiness prevails' (p. 107) – is one to which Fong is consistently faithful in this absorbing book, and one that might give some heart to anyone still invested in the project of critique in a purportedly 'post-critical' moment that surely needs it more than ever.

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